

City of Alexandria, Virginia

22
12-8-03

MEMORANDUM

DATE: DECEMBER 4, 2003

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER *PS*

SUBJECT: VISITORS CENTER STUDY

ISSUE: Findings from visitors center consultant study and public process.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council receive this report and the following recommendations and docket the report for public hearing on Saturday, January 24, and consideration on Tuesday, January 27:

- (1) remove the Market Square and the expanded Ramsay House Visitors Center options from further consideration;
- (2) maximize the benefit of Ramsay House for visitors by improving its interior programming of space;
- (3) pursue initiatives regarding improved signage, marketing, kiosks, parking, tour bus management, and a new King Street Metrorail station visitor information area; and
- (4) not pursue the leasing of a retail site in the Market Square area at this time.

BACKGROUND: Over the past decade the City has considered alternative locations for its current visitors center located at 221 King Street in Ramsay House. In order to determine if a new visitors center was needed and, if so, where it should be located, the City retained expert consultants in the area of tourism development and promotion to conduct a thorough and independent study of the needs of the City. In April of 2003 Council held a work session with the consultant (Parter International), and in June Council received the staff report and the consultant's full report, which made recommendations for improving the quality of Alexandria's visitors' experience. The report recommends that the City build a new, expanded visitors center, and recommends as the preferred locations either an expanded Ramsay House or a new building on Market Square. The Parter report also recommends, regardless of whether or not there is a new visitors center, that the City make improvements to signage, tourist information, parking, and transit and tour bus management associated with the primary tourist areas in Old Town.

Last June City Council asked staff to study the sites and scenarios recommended by the consultant and to bring the consultant's report and site options before the public in a review process, in order to ensure that citizens were informed of the Parter recommendations and had sufficient opportunity for input. The Department of Planning & Zoning facilitated a series of public review sessions during September through November of this year. Attachment 1 contains

a list of invitees to these sessions; Attachment 2 contains the findings which resulted from the public review process and staff analysis.

CONCLUSION: City residents and business owners have many opinions on a new visitors center, some of which differ from those of the expert consultants who see Alexandria from a visitor-centric point of view. As a result, what may work best as a visitors center may not work best from a wider community perspective. On the other hand, the consultant provided important information to the City, its staff, residents and businesses about the dynamics of an effective visitors center, provided sound reasons why visitors center locations outside of the visitors domain would not be a wise City investment, and identified key strategies which could strengthen the visitor experience in Alexandria.

Considering the consultant's analysis and recommendations, the opinions of the community members who participated in the community process, the fiscal impact and costs of a visitors center (Attachment 3), and the City's fiscal outlook over the next five to ten years and the many other areas competing for City resources, staff recommends the following:

- a new visitors center *not* be placed on Market Square;
- Ramsay House not be expanded because of the resulting loss of open space;
- Ramsay House, because it is so well located, be reviewed to maximize the visitor experience there by improving its interior programming of space;
- staff, in conjunction with ACVA, pursue the non-center focused consultant recommendations regarding improved signage, marketing, kiosks, parking and tour bus management, and a King Street Metrorail station visitor information area; and
- the leasing of a retail site in the Market Square area for a visitors center not be pursued at this time, but remain as an option for future consideration.

FISCAL IMPACT: For any option chosen by Council, staff will need to develop more specific proposals with detailed costs for final Council determination before the option is implemented. The FY 2005 operating and capital budget process would best serve as the appropriate venue for Council to consider the further tourism investments recommended above. Attachment 3 discusses the economic and fiscal impact of a visitors center in more detail.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1. List of community groups invited to participate in Visitors Center Report discussions

Attachment 2. Visitors Center Study Public Process Findings

Attachment 3. Fiscal Analysis Discussion

Attachment 4. Docket item, June 5, 2003, which details the findings of the Visitors Center Consultant Report (includes consultant's Executive Summary and PowerPoint presentation)

STAFF:

Mark Jinks, Assistant City Manager

Barbara Ross, Deputy Director, Planning and Zoning

Tom Luebke, City Architect, Planning and Zoning

Visitor Center Study Meetings/Presentations

Group(s)	Date/Time	Where
-Planning Commission-	September 4th-7:30 p.m. (at the end of the regular meeting)	City Hall, Council Chambers
-Alexandria Economic Development Partnership (AEDP)	September 24th-4:00 p.m.	AEDP Board Room
-King Street Metro Enterprise Team -Upper King Street Neighborhood Association -Old Town Business Association -Alexandria Chamber of Commerce -Inner City Civic Association	September 24th-7:30 p.m.	City Hall, Room 2000 (consultant presentation)
-ACVA Board - Lunch meeting	September 25th-11:30 a.m.	Holiday Inn, First St. (consultant presentation)
-Alexandria Federation of Civic Assn. -Historic Alexandria Foundation -Alex. Restoration and Preservation Committee -Historic Alexandria Resources Commission -Collaboration Committee - Alexandria Historical Society - Alexandria Association	October 8th-5:30 p.m.	City Hall, Room 2000 (consultant presentation)
-Old Town Civic Association	October 8th-8:00 p.m.	The Lyceum (consultant presentation)
-BAR-Old and Historic District	October 15th -7:30 p.m. (at end of regular mtg.)	City Hall, Council Chambers (staff)
-Parker Gray Board	October 22nd-7:30 p.m.	City Hall, Council Chambers (staff)
-General Public meeting	October 23rd -7:30 p.m.	City Hall, Room 2000 (consultant presentation)

Visitors Center Study Public Process Findings

Public Process Findings. The public process sought to involve those representative organizations which are directly and indirectly associated with Old Town, the historic attractions, and with business and the tourist industry. Meetings were advertised and generally well attended. The meeting format was generally one of presentation of the consultant's recommendations, followed by questions, answers and general discussion. The following discussion summarizes the most important issues raised in the public meetings.

1. Disparate opinions about tourism generally

Participants in the discussions expressed a variety of sentiments regarding a new visitors center. On the one hand, there are those, typically some Old Town residents, who recommend that the City *not* promote tourism if it means additional people, cars and buses visiting Old Town and creating more activity. On the other, members of the historic preservation community, including members of the Boards of Architectural Review, believe that the City, because it maintains a national treasure in its historic districts, has an obligation to promote knowledge of and understanding of it, and to make it as available to others as possible. The business community is supportive of the goal of increasing tourism as a way to grow the City's economy and increase tax revenues generated from non-residents.

2. Need for a visitors center

The community meetings also revealed that there is not a clear consensus in the community on the need for a new or expanded visitors center, or what location would best be used for a new or expanded center. Where there is support for a visitors center, it is highest from economic development and tourist-oriented businesses. While many acknowledge the importance of tourism as contributing to the local economy, many participants in the process were concerned about the impact of tour buses and the tourists associated with them. With a few exceptions, most participants agreed with the consultant report's finding that the existing Ramsay House was inadequate in its current form. It was acknowledged that Ramsay House, with its small 400 square foot welcome, orientation and information area, and its accessibility problems, does not adequately serve the City's tourists. A question was also raised about the accuracy of the statement that Ramsay House currently serves about 115,000 visitors per year. This 115,000, if anything, underreports visitors, as ACVA keeps a daily hand count, with visitors sometimes not all counted if the staff is busy serving them. ACVA then tallies the daily count into weekly, monthly and annual data.

3. Importance of Open Space

One clear message from the community relates to the value of open space. The consultants' two top recommendations for a new visitors center both involve losing existing open space. The proposed expansion of Ramsay House would require removing the small garden area between the current visitors center and the 219 Restaurant. Building a new structure on Market Square would remove at least one of the large landscaped areas framing the plaza that the public enjoys and expects to remain. Although there are some members of the public who are supportive of both of

these two site proposals, the great majority of people who gave an opinion felt that the loss of existing open space for a visitors center was not warranted.

4. Location for a visitors center

After reviewing many sites City-wide, the clusters of sites identified positively by the consultants were focused either on lower King Street in the vicinity of the existing Ramsay House, or on upper King Street at or near the King Street Metrorail station. The rationale for these two general areas is that for a city with Alexandria's attributes, a visitors center, to be successful, needs to be where the visitors are, and cannot be outside the visitor domain.

a. Lower King Street. The consultant report favored the development of two lower King Street sites, Ramsay House and Market Square, as being the most positive options in terms of access, visibility, and location within the visitor domain. Probably the strongest amount of community support exists for the expansion of Ramsay House, although significant concerns were voiced about both the loss of open space and the compromise of what is rightly or wrongly considered Alexandria's oldest building. However, many in the historic community recognize that Ramsay House and its garden is not an historically accurate reproduction of prior structures on that site. The option to put the visitors center on Market Square was by far the most divisive alternative, with responses either highly positive (as an enhancement of the quality of the existing urban plaza) or highly negative (as the destruction of a civic space that is considered sacred). What emerged from the public process was that the development of either of these options runs counter to the community's strongly held values regarding the preservation of open space and civic landmarks.

b. Upper King Street. Regarding the potential locations on upper King Street for a center, as upper King Street is not the heart of the visitor domain, there was little overt support for locating a full visitors center there, although it was the preferred option of some Old Town residents and some upper King Street businesses. Getting tourists who most often use Washington Street to enter the City, and who want to visit lower King Street sites, to go to an upper King Street visitors center is not likely. However, in recognition of the importance of transit-oriented tourists, there was virtually unanimous community support for developing a small satellite visitors information area or kiosk facility in association with the King Street Metrorail station. This idea remains a strong option, and City staff has discussed with WMATA staff the concept of using largely empty space within the station concourse or outside the station on WMATA property. While WMATA staff responded that it will only support use of its property outside the station building for a kiosk, further discussion between WMATA and the City is warranted to see if WMATA would be flexible about the interior use of the King Street Metrorail station space.

Based on the feedback from the public process, there is no one specific location for a new visitors center generally accepted in the Alexandria community. On the other hand, the prevailing opinion was to support the consultants' finding that the lower King Street area in the existing Ramsay House/Market Square area is the best location for a visitors center because that

area includes or is near the great majority of major tourist attractions and is the most visible. Given the lack of support for losing open space at Ramsay House or Market Square, several members of the public suggested that the City continue to look for a different location, including existing retail spaces.

5. Potential Other Locations

Two existing retail sites were reviewed because they are either already under City lease or will be vacated by their existing tenant in 2005 and might be viable locations for a store-front type visitors center, based on their size and location near the Ramsay House/Market Square area within the visitor realm, including:

- 401 King Street/Tavern Square (currently privately-leased)
- 132 North Royal Street/Tavern Square (currently City-leased)

These sites, and others that may become available, offer the advantage of being close to or facing King Street and are adjacent to or within one block of Market Square with all its advantages of access and visibility. Other retail sites near King and Union or on Lee Street were considered, but they would not be viable sites, as their location has significant drawbacks. Each of the two retail sites reviewed (401 King and 132 N. Royal) offer enough floor area to accommodate the program recommended for the visitors center (3,600 square feet) all on one level adjacent to the street. Furthermore, these spaces are available now or in the near future for lease and could be used for a limited period of time (five to seven years) on a trial basis to determine the effectiveness and viability of a larger visitors center for the City. While there are substantial costs of leasing (\$100,000 to \$200,000 per year) and outfitting space (\$500,000 to \$800,000) for this use, they can be considered in relationship to the sunk costs and longer schedule of planning for and building a new structure. The City's consultant has reviewed these sites, and believes that these two spaces, while a less effective location for a visitors center than Market Square or Ramsay House, could be successful visitors center sites. Although rental of space is less expensive in the short-term, it is more expensive in the long-term than new construction. However, that would be the tradeoff required in order to fully preserve the Market Square and Ramsay House open space.

6. Maximize the benefit of Ramsay House

While there are limitations which cannot be overcome given the physical constraints of Ramsay House, internal improvement in how the space is used is feasible. For example, using video and flat screen technology and/or computer technology, it would be possible to accomplish some of what an expanded visitors center could accomplish in regards to increased tourist information and orientation. Also, rethinking how the ancillary space of Ramsay House could be used may yield some enhancements worth pursuing.

7. Signage, Kiosks, and Marketing

There was close to unanimous support for a City study to create a comprehensive, coordinated City-wide signage system to assist visitors find their way along King Street and around Old Town. In follow up to the consultant recommendations this summer and fall, City staff have been working with staff from the Society for Environmental Graphic Design to learn about how

comprehensive sign programs work and also learn how to structure a proposed City-wide signage program. In September the City installed new simple temporary blue and white wayfinding signs along King Street. These signs have received strong positive feedback from visitors, residents and the business community, and thereby reinforced the consultant's recommendations about the benefits of a comprehensive City-wide improved signage program. At some point later in this fiscal year, and in coordination with the FY 2005 City budget process, staff will bring specific signage structure, process, cost and timetable recommendations forward for Council consideration. Kiosks at special locations, including near or inside the King Street Metrorail station, were also suggested, which could include maps and generalized information about historic attractions, restaurants and shopping opportunities. Installing an information desk (to be staffed during peak tourist months) inside the King Street Metrorail station is an idea also worth pursuing. Increased investment in marketing by ACVA is also a viable alternative way to increase tourism. Marketing can be targeted to specific audiences and geographic locations and can result in an increase in the number of visitors to Alexandria.

8. Parking, Traffic and Tour Buses

There was also near universal concern about parking and car and tour bus traffic management, and recommendations that the City create a more organized approach to directing visitors and tourism to specific locations so that they are not unnecessarily traveling or parking on City streets. While improved signage will address this issue to some degree, more active parking and tour bus management is desirable. In addition, suggestions were made about increasing the use of transit for visitors. In order to deal with parking, traffic and tour bus issues, it is recommended that ACVA and City staff begin to work out specific recommendations for community and Council consideration.

Fiscal Impact of the New Visitors Center

While it would be ideal to be able to measure what the economic impact of tourism is in relation to the current Ramsay House Visitors Center (as well as any future visitors center alternative), the numerous variables which influence tourists and business travelers' decisions make this difficult to accomplish with the desirable degree of accuracy. The problem is in part due to the fact that tourism is generated from a number of sources such as guide books, news stories, advertising, marketing, word-of-mouth, hotel incentive packages, tour operator business plans, as well as the location of business meetings and conventions. In addition, tourism is influenced by changes in the national economy, social trends and preferences (such as the recent trend towards heritage and cultural tourism), as well as by external events (such as perceived terrorism threats).

As a result, a realistic, hard quantification of the impact of a visitors center is not feasible, according to the consultants hired for this study assignment. In the early parts of this study, staff pressed the consultants on this issue, and they indicated that developing quantitative measures would not be productive or reliable. While some firms and the tourism industry produce economic impact studies, one usually finds, when looking at the key variables used, that major subjective judgments have been quantified to create what appear to be objective results.

However, while measuring the economic impact of a new or expanded visitors center is difficult, one can project current City tax revenues directly related to tourism and then measure what a one percent increase in tourism tax revenues would be. One can then (a) determine the annualized costs of a new or expanded visitors center (operating costs plus amortizing capital or rental costs), (b) determine the percentage increase in tourism revenue necessary to equal these annualized costs, and (c) determine whether that percentage increase in tourism revenue meets a test of reasonableness.

- Each 1% increase in current tourism-related tax revenue equals about \$100,000. (This is based on estimated annual tourist-related tax revenue of \$10 million, which in turn is based on total annual tourist-related spending in Alexandria of about \$500 million.)
- Estimated annual new operating and amortized capital or rental costs of a visitors center is approximately \$200,000 to \$400,000 per year
- Therefore, it would take a 2% to 4% increase in tourism-related tax revenue to reach a breakeven point of revenues vs. expenditures.

As part of the Parter consulting team, the architectural firm of Powe Jones Associates estimated the construction costs of the Ramsay House renovation and expansion at \$1.6 million and the Market Square option at \$2.6 million. The City then retained a firm to review the options and verify the cost estimates, as well as to review the proposals for constructability. The resulting cost estimates were not materially different than the Powe Jones estimates, and they concurred that the two plans were constructable. It is estimated that additional staffing and operating costs of new or expanded visitors center facilities would total about \$0.1 million per year. If the City rents space for a facility, the annual rental costs would range from about \$0.1 million to \$0.2 million per year.

For other initiatives such as signage, marketing, outfitting the King Street Metrorail station and kiosks, the costs vary. For a City-wide signage program the costs could be as high as \$2.3 million (mostly up-front capital costs which can be phased in) plus an ongoing maintenance cost. Marketing costs can also vary depending on the level of increased marketing desired and determined to be effective. Consideration of an increase in marketing efforts of between \$0.1 million and \$0.5 million would be reasonable. The costs of outfitting the King Street Metrorail station (or an area immediately outside of it) would vary widely depending on the level of outfitting possible and desired. The costs of kiosks would also vary, depending on the number and features desired in the kiosk type chosen.

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JUNE 5, 2003
TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL
FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER *PS*
SUBJECT: RECEIPT OF THE VISITORS CENTER CONSULTANT REPORT

ISSUE: Consideration of the next steps in the Visitors Center Study process.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council:

- (1) Receive the *Alexandria Visitors Center Report* and refer it to the City staff for coordination and further analysis, discussion and consideration by the community; and
- (2) Request that the City Manager bring recommendations concerning the establishment (or not) of a new or expanded visitors center to the City Council for public hearing and final determination before the end of 2003.

BACKGROUND: Over the past decade the City has several times considered alternative locations for its current visitors center located at 221 King Street in Ramsay House. These considerations have been based upon the widespread acknowledgment that tourism is an important element of the Alexandria economy and that Ramsay House is too small (with only a 400 square foot welcome, orientation and information area) to adequately serve tourists, as well as its tourist information room is difficult to find and utilize with the requirement of climbing many stairs, and with an entrance that is difficult for tourists to find and utilize.

In order to determine the best location for a visitors center and to define what a visitors center for the City of Alexandria should be, the City sought out, through a competitive process, experts in the area of tourism development and promotion to conduct a thorough and independent study of the needs of the City. The study was started in the fall of 2002 with a series of interviews of residential and business stakeholders, entailed substantial data gathering and analysis, and included a presentation at a Council work session on April 22 of the consultant's draft findings. The consultant has now finished its report: *Alexandria Visitors Center Report* (Attachment 1). Given the voluminous size of this report and its appendices, copies will be placed for public review in the City Clerk's Office, the Department of Planning and Zoning, at the Beatley Library, and at the offices of the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association. Copies of the executive summary of the report (Attachment I) and the consultant's PowerPoint summary (Attachment II) of the report will be posted on the City's web site, as well as the Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association (ACVA) web site.

Report Findings

National and Local Tourism Trends: The report notes that while tourism grew in the 1990s nationally, it slowed in 2001. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, the temporary closing of National Airport, the sniper incidents, the anthrax incidents, and the periodic increased terrorist alerts have all contributed to a decline in the tourism industry in the region, as well as in Alexandria. While tourism nationally and in the region is expected to grow in the future, the growth may be slow and may be selective based upon increased competition for limited tourism dollars.

Alexandria has assets which are considered competitive. These include being in a state which has 55% of the population of the United States within 500 miles and being very attractive to cultural and heritage oriented tourists. More tourists are now choosing to drive and to take shorter, but more frequent vacations. Cultural and heritage tourism is important because this element of the tourism market is growing, has longer staying patterns, and spends more than typical tourists.

A recently completed survey of 952 visitors to the City, titled *Profile Study of the Alexandria Visitor*, found that:

- Alexandria tourists have a higher median income of \$77,000 which is substantially higher than the national average of \$48,500,
- Repeat business is evident as 62% of tourists have been to Alexandria before,
- Word-of-mouth from friends and family dominates the source for discovering Alexandria,
- Alexandria's proximity to Mt Vernon is important,
- 59% of visitors stay at least two days,
- Nine out of ten visitors give Alexandria the highest satisfaction rating allowed, and
- On a list of twelve activities that tourists to Alexandria recommend, the Visitors Center was 12th on the list with only 3% of the survey respondents listing it.

Comparables: The consultant study looked at five other jurisdictions' visitors centers. Factors reviewed included: location in relation to the tourist domain, size of facility, parking, shuttle services and purpose that the facility serves in order to understand what might work for Alexandria. These included:

- Charleston, South Carolina
- Montgomery, Alabama
- Corning, New York
- Newport, Rhode Island
- Easton, Pennsylvania

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT): In order to determine the type and location of a visitors center for the City, a SWOT analysis was undertaken to assess and evaluate the tourism market and to help develop recommendations for City Council consideration. A summary of this analysis is provided in chart form below:

Proposed Mission: Based upon the analysis of the Alexandria tourism market and its potential, as a precursor to making site and facility size recommendations, the consultant drafted a proposed mission for an Alexandria Visitors Center. This proposed mission states:

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-defined Visitor Domain • Access to Large Regional Market • Condition of Public Environment • Unique Product • Alexandria is Attractive to the Cultural & Heritage Tourist • Tourist Satisfaction • Increasing Realization of the Value Tourism Provides the City 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signage • Parking • Visitor and Tourism Data and Research with Respect to Day Trippers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Visitors Center • Increased Tourism Marketing • Support for Tourism • Maximize Riverfront Potential • Partnerships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnering with Washington, DC and Mt. Vernon • Moving Tourists Beyond Old Town • Nurture Relationship with Motorcoach Operators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicts Between Tourism Activities and Neighborhoods • Change • Traffic Congestion • Competition from Other Localities • Terrorism

The important conclusion that the consultant reached states “the (Alexandria Visitors) Center should orient, inform and educate visitors; prepare them for the remainder of their stay; motivate them to go out and find historic sites, and other attractions and amenities. The Center will provide an interpretative context for, or linking of, these sites, attractions and amenities, but it will not, for the most part, be a place where the stories are told of the interpretation is rendered for individual sites and attractions.” This conclusion is key as it ultimately drives the scope (size, staffing, mission, and cost), and to some degree the locational options of an Alexandria Visitors Center.

As an outcome of this conclusion, the consultant recommends that the City have a visitors center of 3,500 square feet (gross square feet), including a 1,500 square foot information and orientation area. Such a facility could serve about 1,000 visitors on a peak day, including about 75 persons at any single peak time.

Locational Analysis: In developing locational options for a visitors center, the consultant had to analyze travel patterns, the location of tourist sites, and fit that with the experience that (p. 66) “successful visitors centers are located where they are easy to find and use, both for tourists who intended to stop there first, as well as for those who come upon it in their travels and decide to stop in.” This resulted in the consultant eliminating from consideration locations outside of the tourist domain of Old Town, and then focused for site locations the King Street corridor area from the King Street Metro Station to the Potomac River. This is where the tourists are, where there is greater potential for increasing tourism, where tourists (such as those traveling between Washington D.C. and Mt. Vernon) can be easily diverted to, and therefore this makes the best location to consider in looking at visitors center site alternatives.

Report Recommendations: The report contains two classes of recommendations. The first is a set of general recommendations common to all sites (as well as the status quo option of doing nothing to change the existing Ramsay House Visitors Center). The second set of recommendations represents the site location alternatives for a new or expanded visitors center.

The general recommendations include:

- Substantially improve (or create) signage and wayfinding systems. Informational and directional signage for tourists is a critical weakness of the City. If tourists are to learn what the City has to offer, lengthen their visits, as well as visit again, making it easy to find the visitors center, City historic sites, amenities and parking is necessary.
- Mass transit-oriented tourism should be further encouraged. The DASH About is a start towards this end, but more can be done to encourage more mass transit use, expand the DASH About, as well as encourage visitors who are staying in the Washington D.C. area outside of the City to visit the City via Metrorail.
- Supplemental information opportunities such as having mini-stands or kiosks at City events such as the Red Cross Festival or the Scottish Walk can boost tourism (including promoting Alexandria as a shopping and dining destination), especially from those living in the greater Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area.
- Alternative parking programs (discounts, better signage, increased availability) should be developed in order to make parking for tourists easier than it currently is.
- Encourage greater use of motorcoaches, as well as have motorcoaches extend what is typically a short stay in the City. This would require a more active motorcoach management and expanded off-site parking for motorcoaches.

The six options, which include different siting options, presented by the consultant include:

Options 1 and 2 New Visitors Center on Upper King Street: These options would have a new facility constructed on either the King Street Metro station parking lot or on the east end of the King Street Gardens triangle park adjacent to the King

Street and Diagonal Road intersection. A center at this site would primarily serve Metrorail users and would require most tourists and tour buses to leave the primary tourist domain and go out of their way to use the visitors center.

- Option 3 New Visitors Center in the Metro Station Concourse: This option would construct a visitors center at one end of the Metro station concourse or the other under the existing Metrorail platform. A center at this site would primarily serve Metrorail users and would require most tourists and tour buses to leave the primary tourist domain and go out of their way to use the visitors center.
- Option 4 New Visitors Center on Market Square: This option would add a visitors center to the east side of Market Square in the area where the planters are located and over the entrance to the Market Square parking garage. It is also proposed that a open air pavilion for farmer's market and civic stage use be constructed on the other side of Market Square. Market Square is scheduled for renovation in the next few years and the construction of a new facility would need to be coordinated with it, as well as coordinated with the proposal for the location of a Martin Luther King statue on Market Square. This Market Square location option would site the visitors center in the heart of the tourist domain as well as provide a single floor visitors center. This site is in the heart of the tourist domain. The consultant believes that this location and single floor design is the strongest of all the options presented
- Option 5 Ramsay House Renovation and Expansion: This option would provide a two story addition to Ramsay House over the adjoining garden area. The tourist orientation and information area would be on the first floor and tourist restrooms on the second floor. The report states that the architectural style would be respectful of the history associated with Ramsay House and the surrounding area. This site also is in the heart of the tourist domain, and represents the second strongest of all the options presented.
- Option 6: Ramsay House Status Quo or Renovation with Ancillary Welcome Space at the King Street Metro Station: This option would improve the interior of Ramsay House and add a welcome/orientation area to the King Street Metrorail station to the largely vacant ground level lobby area in the southern end of the station where the original entrance is located.

The major findings of the consultant's report were presented to Council at a work session on April 22, and then to the ACVA Board of Governors and to the Alexandria Hotel Association on May 12. For both of those meetings various civic associations and business groups (in or adjacent to where the site options were proposed), were invited, and some of these groups were able to send representatives. Further presentations to, and discussions with, these groups will need to occur over the coming months. Also an analysis of the various site options by City and ACVA staff will also need to occur. It is proposed that after there is time to conduct these analyses and to obtain

community input, that recommendations be brought back by City staff to Council before the end of 2003, with a public hearing scheduled on the recommendations.

In regard to the visitors center consultant recommendation that, regardless of the option visitors center site option chosen, a better coordinated signage and wayfinding signing program is needed in the City, staff has begun to study how other cities have developed and implemented such coordinated sign programs, as well as what a program might entail and how, and over what time period, it might be implemented. At some point before the end of 2003, either with or separate from the visitors center recommendations, staff will report its findings and make signage and wayfinding program process recommendations to Council. This report would not include a specific new sign program, but would define it, and make recommendations about whether or not, or to what degree, the City should start such a program.

FISCAL IMPACT: The various visitors center options have a wide range of costs. A new or expanded visitors center could cost (measured on an order of magnitude basis) \$1.6 million for the expansion of Ramsay House, \$2.6 million for the Market Square option, and between \$2.2 million and \$2.5 million for the upper King Street options. Ramsay House renovated and not expanded along with a welcome space in the King Street Metro station was not cost estimated, but would be the lowest cost alternative with a wide range of costs depending on how extensive the renovations and the welcome space program design were. Costing the signage and wayfinding program is difficult without defining how comprehensive and extensive such a program would be. Based upon preliminary discussions with experts in this area, an extensive signage and wayfinding program however could cost upwards to \$1.5 million. However, a less comprehensive program could cost much less. A program can also be designed in phases and implemented over a number of years, thereby reducing up-front costs.

ATTACHMENTS:

- I. Executive Summary of the *Alexandria Visitors Center Report*
- II. PowerPoint Summary of the *Alexandria Visitors Center Report*

STAFF:

Mark Jinks, Assistant City Manager

Barbara Ross, Deputy Director, Department of Planning and Zoning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alexandria is a city rich in history and cultural attractions with high quality dining and shopping experiences. These attributes make it attractive to residents and tourists. Tourism plays an important role in the local economy. The City commissioned this study to determine if a new visitors center is warranted and if so where it might be located. In conducting this study a team lead by Parter International, Inc. researched local and national tourism trends, conducted and reviewed surveys, held interviews, meetings and focus groups with a cross section of stakeholders, researched comparable facilities and identified potential locations for a new visitors center.

Alexandria has significant strengths as a tourism destination with a well-defined visitor domain and access to a large regional market of visitors. The city is unique, safe and friendly with visitors showing a high level of satisfaction with their experience in Alexandria. The city is poised to take advantage of growing support for tourism, a strong existing promotional effort and potential partnerships to maintain and enhance the economic benefit associated with increased visitation.

There is strong support for a new or enhanced Visitors Center in Alexandria to provide information and orientation to the city. Such a center would encourage visitors to fully explore the sights, attractions, shops and restaurants, stay longer, spend more, return again and recommend Alexandria as a destination to others. Properly located, it would act as a staging point for tours and events and a sender to all parts of the City.

Stakeholders felt a presence in the Old Town area was important. An analysis of traffic patterns reveals that visitors arrive almost evenly from the north and south making an Old Town location the most viable. Local concerns regarding parking and traffic need to be addressed as part of a larger transportation analysis and plan. The proportion of traffic related to visitors does not significantly contribute to existing conditions. Improvements in signage and wayfinding will help visitors navigate the City more efficiently and ease some of these issues.

An analysis of the existing Ramsay House Visitors Center shows that it is insufficient to meet the current and future goal of effectively and efficiently conveying tourist information. Although thought to be an historic structure, it is in fact a reproduction building that replaced a larger structure that was heavily damaged by fire in the 1940's. In a main area of about 400 square feet, the building currently serves more than 115,000 visitors a year. The majority of these visitors arrive in a season starting in April and running through October. To properly accommodate and serve existing visitors and anticipated growth in visitation, Alexandria needs a Visitors Center of approximately 3,500 gross square feet.

The Parter Team established site criteria and reviewed potential Visitors Center scenarios with a variety of stakeholders. With input from those interviewed, the Team identified potential locations throughout the city. Each location was analyzed with respect to its positive and negative impacts on residential and commercial activities in the surrounding area, traffic patterns, parking availability, public transportation, accessibility and other factors.

A number of recommendations are made which are common to all locations. These include improvements in signage and wayfinding, exploration of changes in public bus service through special passes, extension of DASH About or free off peak service, and additional detailed parking and traffic evaluations. Motorcoach management through signage and route alterations is also recommended. Finally, creating supplemental information opportunities for festivals, events and busy days is also recommended.

Seven recommendations are made that include five potential locations. Three locations surround the King Street Metro Station. They are construction of a new facility either on the triangle formed by Diagonal, King and Daingerfield or on the Metro parking lot area or in the METRO Station Concourse. Two locations are in the heart of Old Town. They are a renovation and expansion of Ramsay House and the construction of a pair of pavilions on the planter areas of Market Square. One of these pavilions would function as the Visitors Center and the other as an open-air structure for the farmers market, events and festivals. Another option is to renovate Ramsay House and create an ancillary space associated with the King Street METRO Station. Lastly, the option exists not to make investment in physical improvements but rather to expand tourism marketing.

After thorough analysis and a series of public meetings and presentations, the Parter Team believes that the strongest options, and those with support from stakeholders, are the Ramsay House expansion and the Market Square options. The Market Square option is stronger programmatically than Ramsay House in terms of creating a positive visitor experience within the center. Both of these options serve to create a strong central presence in the visitor domain that is welcoming to visitors and conveys the quality experience associated with the City that will encourage people to stay longer, spend more and return again.

Alexandria Visitors Center Analysis

The Parter International Team

Parter International, Inc.

Powe.Jones Architects

EDAW

Gorove-Slade Associates

Gallagher & Associates

April 22, 2003



The Assignment

- The Assignment:
 - Whether New Visitors Center Warranted
 - If So, Where Should It Be Placed?



Information Gathering

- Secondary Research
 - Local / National
- Primary Research
 - Interviews
 - Site Visits
 - Surveys
 - Focus Groups
 - Client Meetings

Findings

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-Defined Visitor Domain Access to Large Regional Market Condition of Public Environment Unique Product Alexandria is Attractive to the Cultural & Heritage Tourist Tourist Satisfaction Increasing Realization of the Value Tourism Provides the City 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signage Parking Visitor and Tourism Data and Research With Respect to Day Trippers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New Visitors Center Increased Tourism Marketing Support for Tourism Maximize Riverfront Potential Partnerships Partnering with Washington, DC and Mt. Vernon Moving Tourists Beyond Old Town Nurture Relationship with Motor Coach Operators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflicts between tourism activities and neighborhoods Change Traffic Congestion Competition From Other Localities Terrorism




Tourism & Economics

- Strong drive market
- Alexandria tourist median income
- Repeat visitors
- Satisfaction rating
- The DC visitor
- Tourism economic impact
- Motor coach impact



Proposed Visitors Center Mission

- Provide a welcoming, pleasing and fun experience designed to encourage visitors:
 - to participate in all aspects of Alexandria;
 - to visit the surrounding area of Old Town, its historic and other attractions, restaurants and shopping;
 - to visit other Alexandria area and attractions outside of primary visitor domain;
 - to stay longer in and return to Alexandria; and
 - to leave as satisfied visitors and goodwill ambassadors for Alexandria.



Proposed Visitor Center Mission

- Provide information, directions, basic visitor amenities, reservations and ticketing, and access to attractions, facilities, hotels, restaurants and entertainment.
- Act as a staging point for walking, trolley and garden tours to reduce idling time and travel time for buses in the area.
- Act as a node or pick-up/drop-off point to encourage the use of mass transit.
- Convince tourists that Alexandria cares and wants to help make their stay an interesting and pleasant one.



Comparables

- Charleston, South Carolina
- Montgomery, Alabama
- Newport, Rhode Island
- Corning, New York
- Easton, Pennsylvania
- Types of Visitors Centers
 - Information centers
 - Information and orientation centers
 - Interpretive centers



Ramsay House Analysis

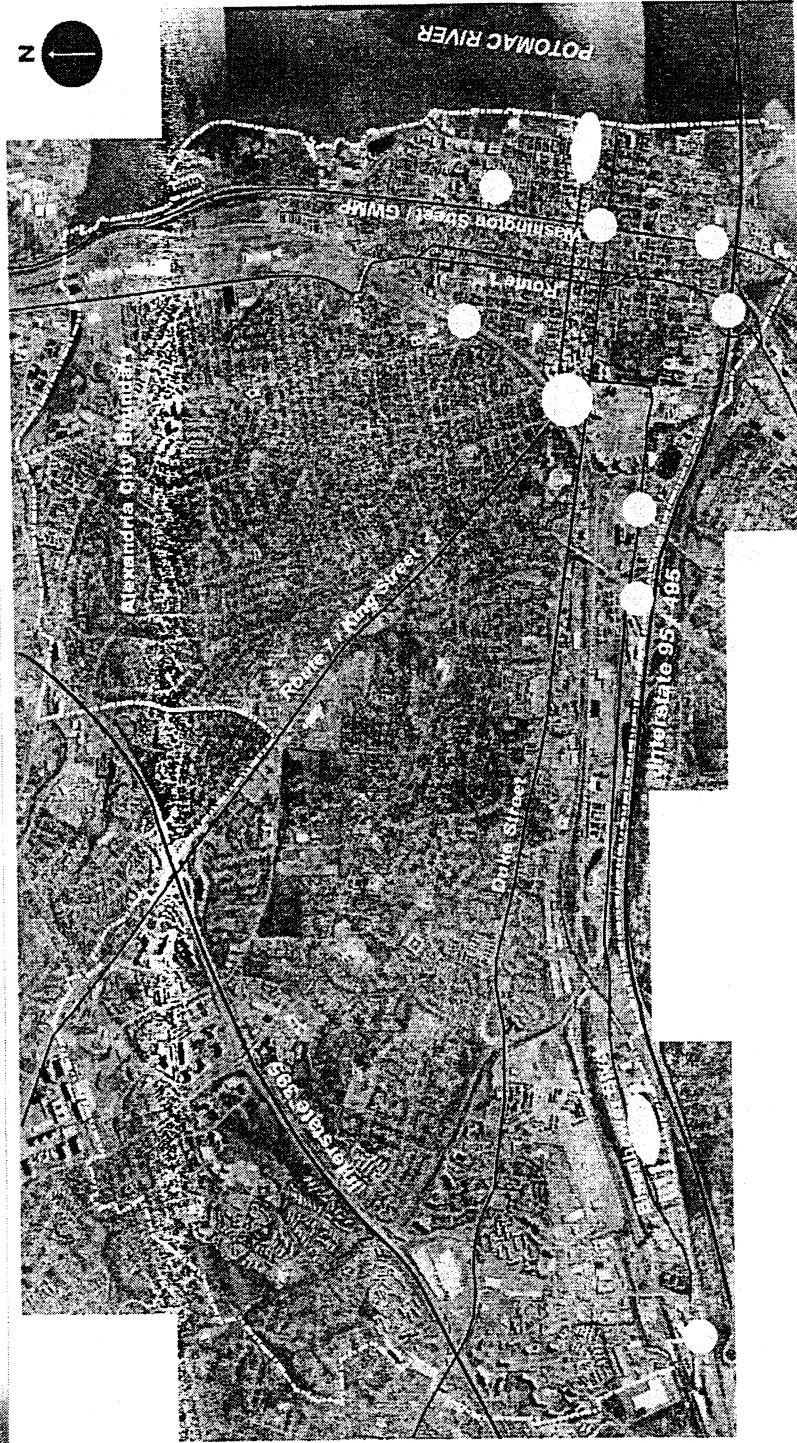
- History
- Services Offered
- Visitation & Usage
- Transportation
- Traffic & Parking
- Assessment



Site Criteria

- Relationship to tourist domain- King Street/center of Old Town
- Positive and negative impacts on residential and business neighbors
- Easy vehicular access, convenient to parking, public transportation/DASH/shuttle
- Convenience for motor coach tours
- Exterior spaces usable in fair weather for overflow and staging
- Visually accessible and identifiable for pedestrian and car traveler
- Connections and relationships to attractions, lodging, shopping & restaurants
- Public acceptance/acceptability
- Costs
- Operational issues

Locations Considered




EDAW

POTENTIAL LOCATIONS CONSIDERED

CITY OF ALEXANDRIA
VISITOR CENTER ANALYSIS

Parter International, Inc.



Recommendations Common to All

■ Signage & Wayfinding

- Improvements will help manage traffic & parking, define districts & identity, reinforce the experience, create linkages

■ Public Transportation

- Encourage special bus passes; Extend DASH ABOUT to weekdays or free off-peak DASH
- King Street signal synchronization & larger pull-offs to clear lane of traffic



Recommendations Common to All

■ Motor Coach Management

- Improve signage, establish designated routes
- Set aside more drop-off on Market Square, identify and mark additional parking and partnerships

■ Parking

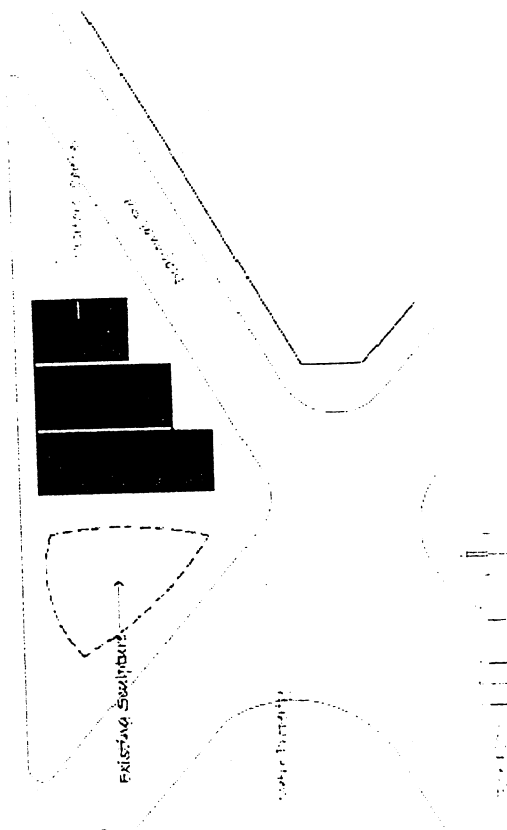
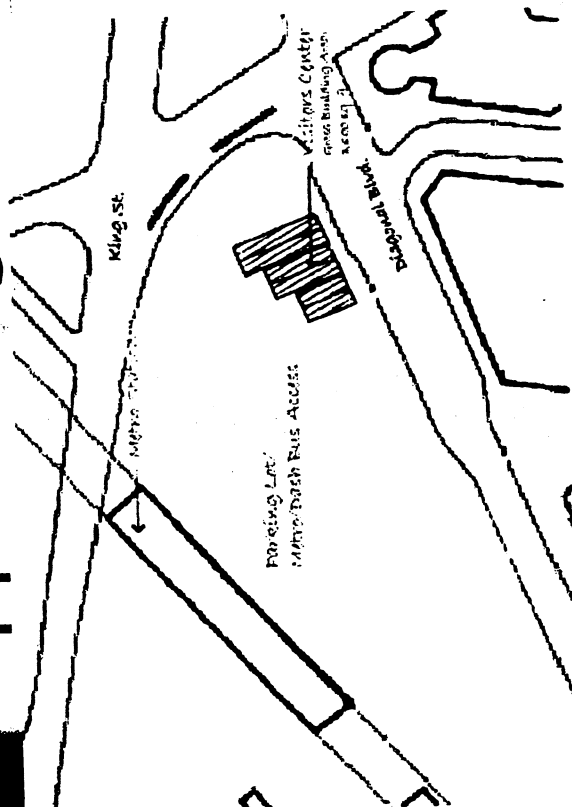
- Develop parking census, review parking regulations & explore discount rate structures



Recommended Site Alternatives

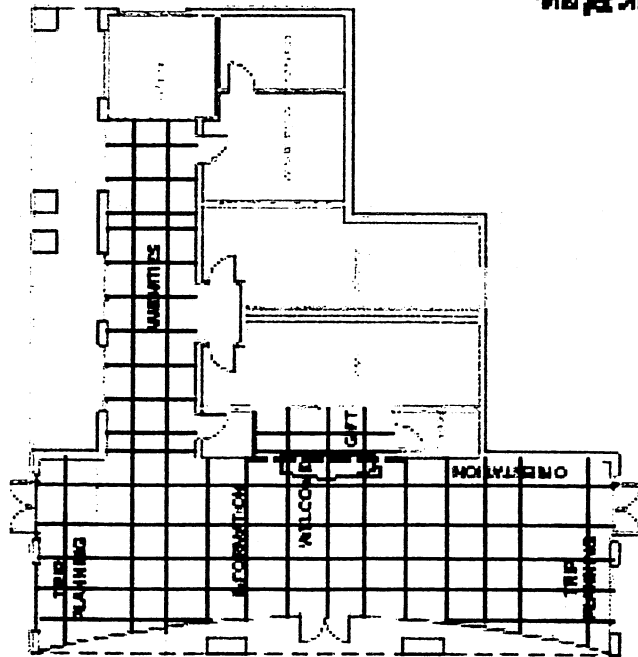
- King Street Metro Station Lot
- King Street Triangle
- King Street Metro Concourse
- Market Square
- Ramsay – Renovation & Expansion
- Ramsay – Status Quo/Renovate+Metro
- Ramsay – Status Quo – Marketing

Upper King Street Site Alternatives

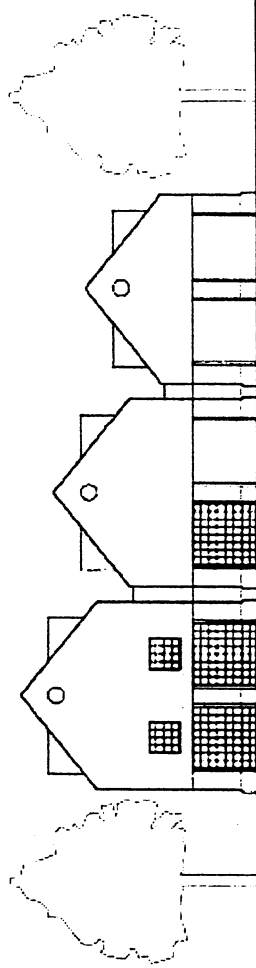




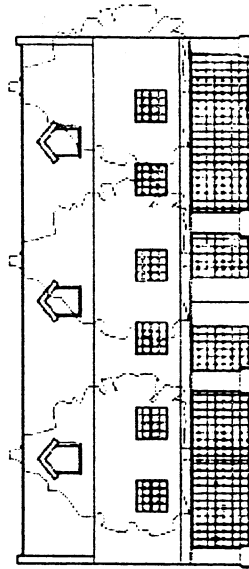
Upper King Street Alternative



Floor Plan



Side Elevation



Front Elevation



Ramsay House Expansion Alternative

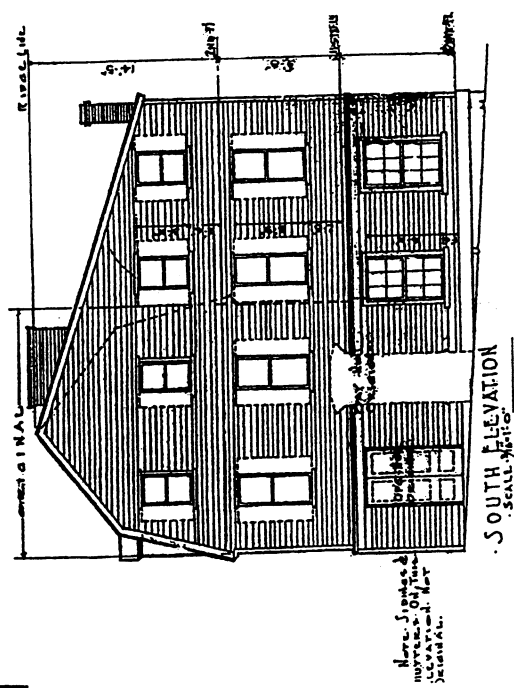
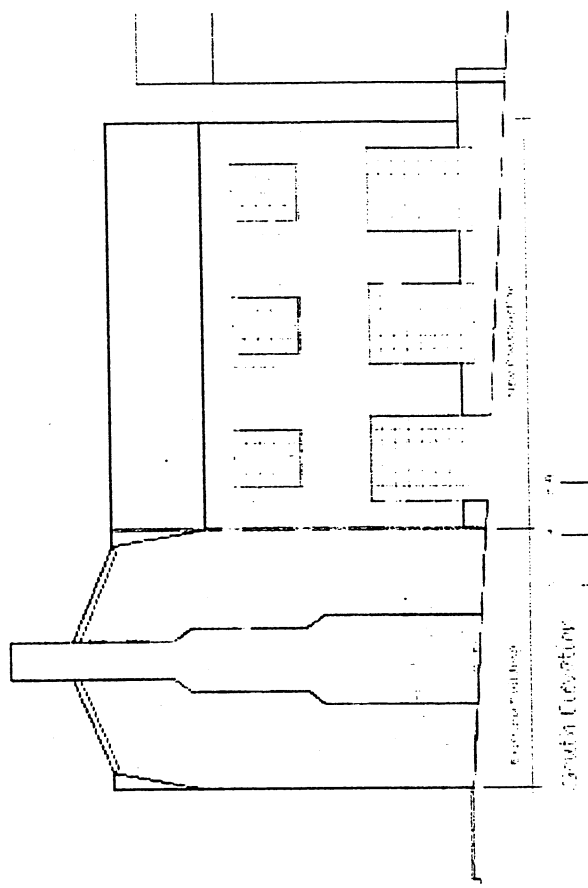
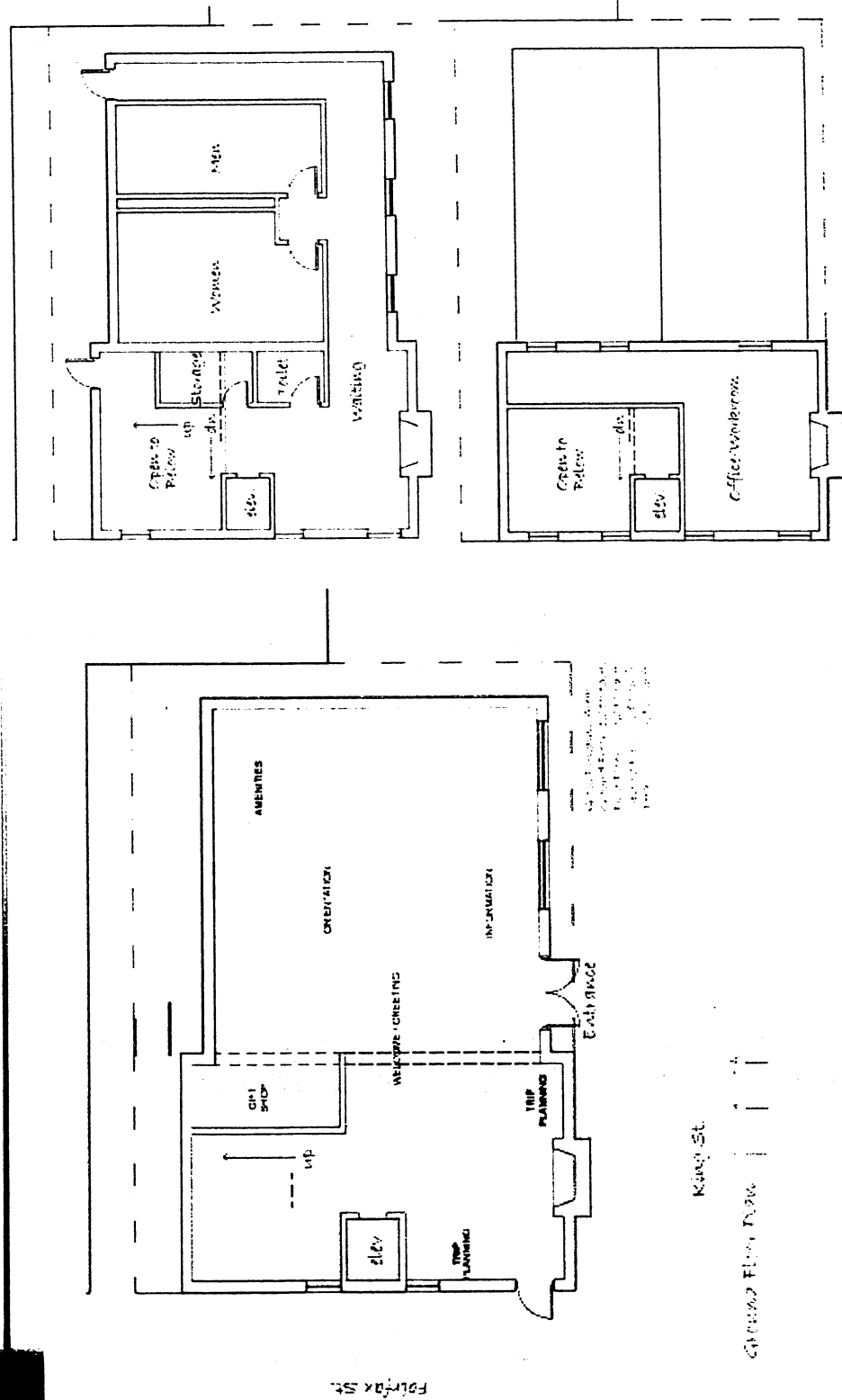


Illustration No. 2-1928 Historic American Building Survey measured drawing of the Ramsay House. The drawing indicates the original configuration of the building. A.A. Biggs, delineator. WPA under the direction of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Branch of Plans and Designs. Source: Special Collections, Alexandria Library



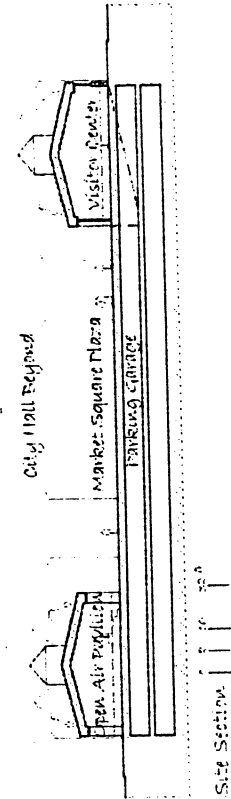
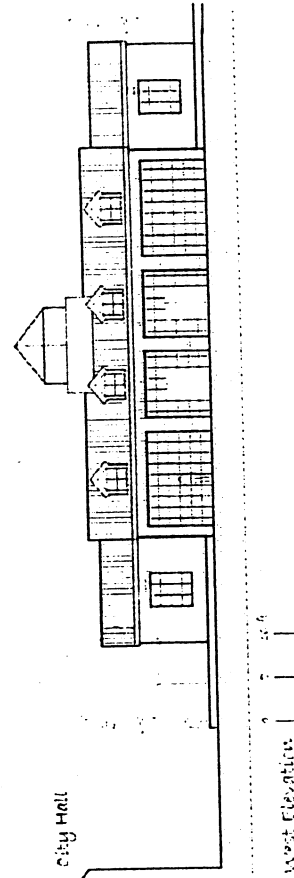
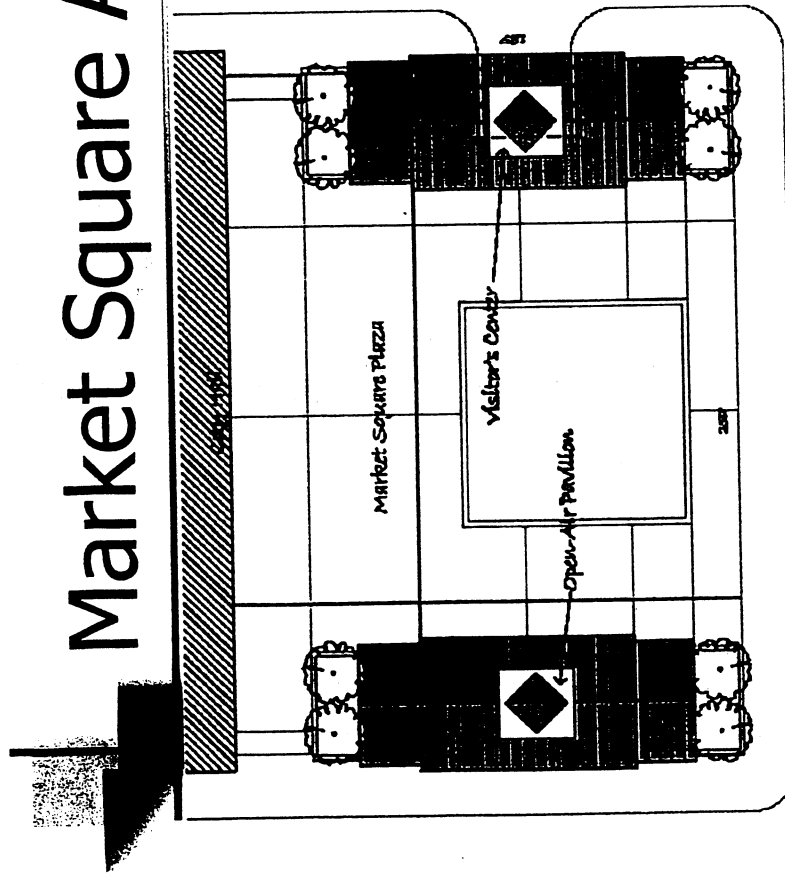


Ramsay House Expansion Alternative



Parter International, Inc.

Market Square Alternative





Site Issues/Properties	Ramsay House- Existing	Ramsay House- Expanded	Market Square Pavilion	Metro Station Concourse	Metro Station Lot	King St. Triangle
SITE ISSUES						
Availability	+	+	+	-	-	+
Site Acquisition	+	+	+	-	-	+
Proximity to Attractions	+	+	+	-	-	-
Visibility	+	+	+	-	-	o
Auto Accessibility	o	o	+	+	+	o
Metro Accessibility	-	-	+	+	+	+
Motorcoach Accessibility	o	o	+	+	+	o
Pedestrian Marshalling	o	o	+	+	+	+
Impact on Neighborhood	-	o	+	+	+	+
Size Fit w/ Program	-	-	+	+	+	+
Impact on Site	+	-	+	+	-	-
VISITOR CENTER ISSUES						
Site/Building Ownership	+	+	+	-	-	+
Visitor Experience	-	o	+	o	o	+
Visitor Convenience	+	+	+	-	-	-
Availability of Bus Queuing	o	o	+	o	+	o
Tour Marshalling Space	-	o	+	+	+	+
Impact on Neighborhood	+	+	+	o	o	o
First Cost	o	o	o	o	o	o
Operational Efficiency	-	-	+	+	+	+
ADA Accessibility	-	-	+	+	+	+